Abstract

Creating a video game avatar is similar to creating a social media profile. However, it is not common to study social media from a "video game perspective." By empiricizing Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory, this study employs an open-ended, online survey to explore the similarities between video gamers' and social media users' online identity negotiations. A total of 58 responses are analyzed. After multiple readings of the informants' responses, I conclude that video gamers are more likely to perform idealized selves in-game and, consequently, are less likely to rely on social media for identity experimentation. Social media users who are not gamers, however, rely on social media sites as spaces in which to create idealized selves.

Keywords: Digital Media, Identity, New Media, Social Media, Social Networking, Video Games

Comparing Social Media and Video Game Identities

Video games and social media are not often thought of as similar digital spaces. Although video games are understood to involve some social media qualities, social media are not thought of as having video game qualities. Indeed, for most scholars and consumers, the two media are separate; they are studied differently (different methodological tools and theoretical backdrops) and understood differently (video games are for play and are "fantastic" and social media are for connecting and are "real"). However, as I have argued in previous papers (author citation removed for review), video games and social media have more in common than many may realize. In particular, the structures of these sites and thus how users perform identity have much in common. After all, digital structures provide the guiding light for users identity performances (Papacharissi, 2009).

My previous work explores the structures of video games and social media, comparing both their technical affordances and general themes regarding identity performance. This study, on the other hand, takes a more informed look at the way gamers and social media users perform in the two spaces to investigate if the two media are in fact similar, and what we can learn by applying this comparison. To do so, I employ Goffman's dramaturgical approach, as outlined in his well-known book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). His theatrical approach has been thoroughly explored in the fields of both video games and social media. Yet, Goffman's methods have not been used to compare video gamers to social media users. Nonetheless, this comparison is important as it can reveal how social media users are compelled to perform in a way similar to gamers due to the sites' presented affordances and desire to immerse users, asking them to suspend disbelief (author citation removed for review).

By surveying emerging adults about their engagement with video games and social media, this study investigates, in particular, how identity is performed online: Do Goffman's themes apply to current video gamers and social media users? Do Goffman's themes highlight potential similarities between the ways that video gamers perform identity and how social media users perform identity? Are there comparable themes that can help future scholars to better study social media users' identity by applying "video game logic?"

Dramaturgical Identity

Goffman (1959) argues that people create and maintain different images for themselves just as stage actors fulfill their roles. It is imperative to understand how people perform their different identities by understanding the "impression of reality" that they deliver to their current stage's audience (p. 17). These performers are using *frontstage* identities. When in a more private role they act in their *backstage*, or private, identities. Part of this impression management is *audience segregation*—if one member of a group witnesses another's performance for a different stage, that person's image is at risk and must be managed.

This sense of identity relies on others—stereotypes of a group are bestowed upon all members. At the same time, however, to truly be a member of a group means adhering to its expected behaviors. As a result, people may fulfill stereotypes just so they may be viewed as belonging to a group. Though calculated, these actions are performed in a way that makes them seem spontaneous in order to be viewed as authentic (Goffman, 1959).

Meyrowitz (1985) comments on the changes introduced to identity management by mass media. In the print era, time and space restricted interaction. Television, however, introduced more complex social stages which created a combination of frontstage and backstage behavior—a *middlestage*. Middlestage allows new access by viewing sidestage activities, allowing

audiences to view parts of actors' performance preparations. This blurring of stages allows audiences to witness others acting differently within that stage, leading audiences to assume improper behavior. However, we often fail to realize, at least initially, that social contexts have been combined. For example, some people may not understand how users of Facebook can have over one thousand friends. But, they are thinking of the word "friend" in a different social context.

Early writing regarding online identity performance praised media for allowing users to remain anonymous and to experiment with identity. In her 1995 book *Life on the Screen,* Turkle explores the space that the web provided to perform identities by exploring multi-user dungeons (MUDs)—online spaces in which users created characters through textual descriptions. Users could have multiple on-screen windows open on their computer at one time, each presenting a different identity, helping users to play with idealized selves (Turkle, 1995). These windows were akin to Goffman's stages.

Today, while video games continue the possibility for anonymity, social media culture makes it more and more difficult to be anonymous online. The subsequent sections more closely examine self-presentation in video games and social media.

Video Games

Current MUDs can loosely be understood as massively multi-player online role playing games (MMORPGs). Gamers create avatars that reflect at least some aspects of themselves. They rely heavily on their own experiences and identities to craft their avatars (Waggoner, 2009), as they frequently look like their creators and possess similar attributes (Bessiere, Seay, & Kiesler 2007; Dunn & Guadagno, 2011; Turkle, 1995; Waggoner, 2009). However, avatars are never exact replicas—they reflect idealized selves; the avatars are often more attractive, more

mature, braver, stronger, and more extraverted than their creators (Dunn & Guadagno, 2011; Turkle, 1995).

Gamers use video games as different stages to perform different aspects of their identities. Within each game, users perform based on Goffman's early analysis. For example, in the MMORPG World of Warcraft (WoW), users design their avatars by selecting "race" and "class" (Beginner's guide, 2012). These choices create groups, analogous to offline groups, which help to define the avatars and their creators. User-created groups are also formed within WoW. These groups are called *guilds*. Gamers can start their own guilds or be invited to join an existing guild.

Paralleling Goffman's analysis, gamers are defined by how other gamers describe them. If gamers stigmatize a gamer for playing poorly, other gamers will no longer want to team up with that avatar. However, because WoW allows for anonymity and for users to create multiple avatars, a gamer is never marginalized for too long.

Social Media

Instead of creating an avatar, social media users create an autobiography through a customizable profile. The introduction of each new social networking site has pushed users further from anonymity. This push is led by the incorporation of pictures into profiles and the requiring of real names and email addresses.

Social media sites may be designed to mimic offline communication, but social media profiles should not be understood as published versions of users' offline or backstage lives. Instead, building a social media profile is constructing a new performance (Chan, 2000). Users report employing social media for self-exploration, getting over shyness, and forming relations. As with avatars, users create social media identities that represent aspects of their desired selves.

For example, females describe themselves as more beautiful while males describe themselves as more macho (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005).

Through the integral profile aspect of photographs, users tell narratives and perform identity through their uploaded pictures. College students validate experiencing an authentic college life by posting pictures of parties and typical college occurrences. In addition, users make use of physical closeness in pictures to simulate emotional closeness (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011).

As Goffman explores in offline interaction, others play a large role in social media identity. One way to define a social media site is to label it as containing networks visible to the public or to all of the users in a member's network (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The displaying of connections helps users to meet new people. However, it also allows users to be defined by whom they choose to allow in their network (boyd, 2006; Donath & boyd, 2004).

Further, segregating these audiences is important in social media; users add family, friends, and co-workers under one profile. Popular social media sites have been found not to create new relationships per se, but to maintain relationships that are established offline (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Sometimes, as Meyrowitz explains, contexts can collapse and social media users can find themselves having to create new performances that are appropriate for multiple audiences (boyd, 2006).

Although early works describe the social media landscape as being anonymous, current social media sites (through more personal information and pictures anchoring users to their offline selves) are not. Social media sites are heading toward monolithic, online identities by tracking users' internet activity and by asking that users connect to their Facebook identities through other, participating sites.

Social Media as Video Games

Social media identity performances may be similar to that of video games, but the two are not often studied as such. If data can support social media as providing a similar experience of identity performance to that of video games, research in the social networking field may expand, and researchers may begin to further understand conceptions and formations of identity online.

In all three levels of engagement—setup, play, and goals—social media closely mimic video games. Users are first asked to create an initial profile with an emphasis on photographs. Gamers are asked to create avatars with both certain skill sets and physical appearances. Users play in the social media world crafting narratives, posting statuses, uploading photographs, and competing for likes, comments, and shares. Gamers compete for relevant in-game currency, gear, and leveling possibilities. Users aspire to be like current-day heroes—celebrities—by creating identities that fall in line with consumer culture expectations and working to maintain this status as social norms change. Gamers work to be the heroes within their game worlds and, through end game scenarios, work to constantly maintain their exalted statuses (for a more thorough comparison see: author citation removed for review).

In *both* media, the structures and afforded options define for the players what they can and cannot do. And, in *both* media, the goal of the designers is to immerse the subscribers in a created world and to ask them to suspend disbelief, giving into the realities and truths crafted therein. Although the available affordances and expectation of suspending disbelief are obvious aspects of game-worlds, they are not often explored thoroughly in social media worlds. Gamers understand that a game cannot be infinite, and suspending disbelief is an obvious necessity seeing that games are nearly always fantastic. Clearly, these are salient caveats when considered a part of the identity performance equation, even though they are not commonly applied to social

media worlds. Thus, my goal is to apply this "video game lens" to social media spaces, to highlight similarities and, perhaps as an even more powerful finding, disparities.

Due to the fact that Goffman's dramaturgical approach is recognized as effective in exploring identity performances, this study employs Goffman's framework of identity performance to explore and compare identities in video games and social media. Because the current research for this area is sparse, preliminary studies need to be conducted to unearth larger themes and to understand what beneficial methods exist for studying this phenomenon. Therefore, the research question for this exploratory study is the following: What similar themes emerge between video gamers' and social media users' digital identity performances?

Method

An open-ended survey was employed to explore the research question. Because understanding social media as providing a video game-like experience is a fairly unexplored area, an open-ended survey works best to coax out themes and to discover general usage norms. Additionally, because the identities explored here largely exist online, asking participants to complete the surveys online encourages them to access their digital identities when contemplating the survey questions.

Participants

The participants consist of 60 undergraduate students at a large, east coast university (age 18-36, M=21, 31 females and 29 males). They reported their ethnic backgrounds as follows: 46 Caucasian, seven African American, three Hispanic, and two Asian. One participant chose to not disclose her ethnic background, and another participant chose "other" but also chose to not disclose his ethnic background.

Survey Questions

A total of 31 questions were included on the open-ended survey to understand identity similarities and differences between video gamers and social media users. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach guided the formation of the questions. Questions fall into one of three categories: *Best Self Scenario*, *On Screen Acting*, and *Who's In, Who's Out*? The following sections outline each category.

Best Self Scenario. This category includes questions regarding how the students fulfill idealized selves through video games and social media. Examples of questions within this category are: What are the similarities and differences when comparing your avatar to your offline identity?; How closely does your avatar physically resemble you?; What information have you chosen to leave out of your profile?; and If you have chosen to use a picture, have you chosen a picture that displays you in a certain way?

On-Screen Acting. As Goffman posits, people act on different social stages to fulfill different roles. Often, people will fulfill norms of acting to validate their membership of social groups—people use certain words and terms that are common to their selected groups. Examples of questions within this category are: Is there a particular language you use in games that you would not use in other situations?; Are there certain normative ways of acting to maintain your video game identity?; Is there a particular language you use on social media that you would not use in other situations?; and Are there certain normative ways of acting to maintain your social media identity?

Who's In, Who's Out? This category focuses on how others play a role in identity performances in video games and social media. Goffman notes that group identity and other people play an important role in the identity of individuals. Examples of questions within this category include: Are your friends in the games the same as those in other contexts?; Would you

be embarrassed if someone who is not a part of your video game network experienced that side of you?; and Would you be embarrassed if someone who is not a part of your social media network experienced that side of you?

The informants were not aware that each survey question fit into one of three categories. They were however aware that the survey was broken into three sections: video games, social media, and demographics. The subsequent section outlines sample questions; the survey in its entirety can be found in the Appendix.

Video games. This section poses questions about gamers' preferred games, why they play these games, if they create personalized avatars, how similar created avatars are to offline identity, if the gamers have in-game friends, and if they perform a certain way while playing.

Social media. This section includes questions about social media users' preferred social networking site, why they use these sites, how similar their online profiles are to their offline identities, if they use pictures to add to their online identities, if the users have online friends, and if the users perform a certain way while online.

Demographics. This section asks participants to list their gender, age, and ethnic background.

Procedure

The survey was created using Google's Documents application. Students were recruited from communication courses at a large, east coast university. The professor of the courses offered extra credit to those students who volunteered to participate; the professor was not involved with the data collection or analysis. Participating students completed the IRB-approved consent forms and returned them to the researcher. The students were randomly assigned to one of two groups, and the online survey was sent to their university email accounts. The students

were given one week to complete the survey. Before analysis, the survey answers were separated from the students' personal information (i.e., university IDs, email addresses, and names) to ensure anonymity. The first group received a survey where Section 1 was the video games section; the second group received a survey where Section 1 the social media section. This process was implemented to prevent order bias.

Analysis

Completed surveys were split into the following four groups depending on usage norms: (1) video gamers, (2) social media users, (3) both gamers and users, and (4) none. A first reading of the results from the open-ended survey revealed recurring themes regarding identity negotiation in video games and social media. Subsequent readings organized the results around these themes, and cases illustrating each theme were identified. Results from each group were compared to the other groups.

Findings

A total of 60 undergraduate students participated in an open-ended, online survey regarding identity negotiation in video games and on social media based on Goffman's dramaturgical approach. Of the 60 students, two reported that they did not play video games or use social media. Therefore, a total of 58 responses were analyzed and broken among the following three groups: video gamers (n=2, both male), social media users (n=30, 23 females and 7 males), and both gamers and users group, (n=26, 7 females and 19 males). For the sake of conciseness, the video game group will be referred to as Gamers, the social media users group as Users, and the both video gamers and social media users group as Both.

The participants reported playing a wide array of games including but not limited to the following: *Mario 64, Zelda, NBA, Call of Duty, Modern Warfare, Fallout, Skyrim, NHL, MLB,*

Grand Theft Auto, Fifa, Halo, and *World of Warcraft*. The reported games spanned genres (e.g., sports, shooters, action, role-playing games [RPGs], massively online role-playing games [MMORPGs], arcade) and platforms (e.g., PC, Xbox, Wii, and Nintendo).

The participants reported using the following social media: Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Wordpress, YouTube, Instagram, and Google+. All but one of the participants that reported using social media included using Facebook, and the majority of participants reported Facebook was their preferred social medium. This was expected—Facebook has a large subscriber base and affords users a plethora of tools to do identity work, folding in other social media apps and platforms (author citation removed for review).

An analysis of the students' responses by question category and by media-user-type follows. General results are outlined by usage groups and a more thorough analysis is included in the "Comparison" section that follows each theme.

Best Self Scenario

Gamers. Of the two participants that reported using video games but not social media, neither of them reported creating avatars for gameplay. Although this group only consists of two participants, this is a potentially important finding. Gamers who are not social media users are also gamers that do not feel the need to create personalized avatars—they do not desire a customizable space that allows them digital identity performance or play.

Users. When creating their identities online, almost all of the social media users reported omitting personal information such as the following: address, phone number, and birth year. Many also noted that while constantly updating the site they are sure to not upload questionable pictures or post crude language. Many of the participants reported that their social media

profiles are similar to their offline selves, although none of them went as far as saying that they are exact replicas.

Participants expressed that their social media profiles are outlets for something that they lack in the offline world. For example, an 18-year-old female said, "Its [sic] different because maybe I wouldn't say these things out loud... like I'm kind of quiet, so its [sic] easier to express myself with written words rather than with speech." This participant has an idealized self that is more outgoing. Therefore, her social media performances allow her to express that idealized self. Additionally, students expressed the ability to edit performances of self before adding them to their social media selves, speaking to Goffman's notion of calculated spontaneity.

A few informants also included their social media profiles present them as more exciting than their offline selves. For example:

> I feel like they are different because my social media profile often makes my life seem more exciting than it is in reality. For example, pictures of me are usually only posted on facebook [sic] after some sort of event or for a purpose, my boring day-to-day activity is seldom documented.

Again, this quote is significant because social media users exploit the sites' tools as a way of more seamlessly editing identity performances to express idealized selves while at the same time seeming spontaneous.

Pictures play a large role in identity performance online. All respondents reported using pictures in their profiles. This is not surprising; it has become a *faux pas* to not include photographs, especially the main, profile picture. Many of the participants reported choosing pictures that made them look attractive. Some went as far as implying in their responses that

people *only* choose "good" pictures of themselves that represent idealized selves. As one 21-year-old female explained:

> i [sic] choose pictures based on how much i [sic] like them and how they represent me as an individual. Obviously, i [sic] try to pick pictures [that] portray a positive image of who i [sic] am. In a way, they are the "ideal" superficial version of me.

To make sure that they maintain these created impressions, many of the respondents reported that they are relentlessly wary of photos in which they are tagged that may threaten the image that they are presenting. The participants mentioned untagging pictures that represented them in an unwanted light such as looking physically unattractive or drunk.

This networked nature of social media that allows friends to not only view profiles, but to also contribute to other's profiles, calls for an added caveat to Goffman's approach. Crafting a desired, often aspirational, identity is threatened online when network members can also do your identity work for you—posting pictures of you, tagging you in posts, commenting on your own additions, and perhaps "policing" your identity claims. Therefore, a new part of identity work subsists in watching and editing our now published, archived, and searchable identities.

Both. Out of the 26 respondents that reported playing video games and using social media, ten reported creating avatars to use in-game.

Video Games

Responding to questions regarding avatar similarities to offline self, many of my informants described physical features. Most of the ten participants included that they tried to make their avatars look as much like them as possible. For example, as a 21-year-old female put it, "I tried to make my avatar look like me, same hair color, same shape head and eyes."

However, my informants also noted that they include idealized qualities. A 21-year-old male said, “They [avatars] typically look like me for the exception of the avatar being more toned.”

Along with physical features, many of the respondents commented on other attributes; they included that they would make their characters act like their offline selves. A 22-year-old male reported that he would create avatars that kept his identity online private. He realized that he did this because he was naturally a mysterious person and wanted his avatar to be mysterious as well. Another 22-year-old male explained how he takes the time to ensure that his avatar has similar skills as his offline ones:

> For example in the game Fallout, two of the attributes you can adjust are ‘Speech’ and ‘Medicine.’ Since I believe I am a fairly good communicator, and I know nothing about medicine, my ‘Speech’ rating is high, and my ‘Medicine’ rating is low.

Respondents noted that they give their avatars idealized attributes. A 21-year-old male who enjoys playing sports video games stated that he ensures that his avatars are very good at playing sports while offline he is not proficient in any sport. Compared to the social media users group, only a very few respondents in this group reported creating avatars that represented idealized selves.

Because game worlds are often fantastic, to feel immersed in the game, gamers want their avatars to resemble them in some way. However, they are also given the freedom to, as with social media platforms, exploit the provided tools and represent aspired qualities. The fantastic world of video games magnifies these idealized selves since in-game-characters can often have unrealistic skills and physical traits.

Social Media

Respondents reported omitting personal information such as the following: birthdates, phone numbers, email addresses, and home addresses. Many of the respondents reported creating their profiles as almost *exact* replicas of themselves. One respondent, a 24-year-old male, went as far as saying, "Not different at all [his profile] because it IS me." A few other respondents included terms such as "exactly," "no difference," "very similar," and "directly similar" to describe how close their social media profiles are to their offline selves.

The theme of remaining authentic while creating and maintain profiles frequently arose in the Both group. Respondents included that they had created their profiles to be exact replicas of their offline selves because they did not want to lie. As a 29-year-old male explained, "For me, I have no reason to lie or even sensationalize anything on my profile. All information posted can be verified." Similarly, a 20-year-old female stated, "I don't try to lie. . .My profile and my offline identity are the same." Many did not understand creating a social media profile in any other way than as a replica of their offline selves.

All of the respondents in this group reported using pictures as a part of their social media identity. Again, many of the participants noted that they included pictures that made them look "good." They were also prone to answering the question regarding chosen pictures as if it was an obvious fact that pictures are only chosen when they make the user look good. For example, a 20-year old male responded, "Naturally, the pictures I choose generally show me in a positive light."

Some students included that pictures only show one-side of their lives. As a 21-year-old female put it, "They make me look fun, socialble [sic] life. Even though. . .it only happens on weekends." A few of the respondents admitted to not actually taking pictures themselves and to only having pictures up on social media that others have taken of them and subsequently tagged.

As a 20-year-old male explained, “I do not make a point to take pictures for the sole purpose of sharing them online, [sic] I in fact rarely take any pictures of my own.”

Many of the participants also explained using pictures to perform social identity. In accordance with Mendelson and Papacharissi’s (2011) findings, the respondents used pictures to validate their offline lives. For example, an 18-year-old female said, “I post pictures from vacations and hanging out with my friends. It is mostly just to document something memorable in my life. They display my friendships because they show what me [sic] and my friends do for fun.”

Comparison. Both of the Gamers included that they did not create avatars to use in-game. These two participants may be classified in the instrumentalist group as Tufekci (2008) discusses; they may like playing video games because they are goal-oriented and not because they need an emotional outlet to express new identities. This is made further clear by the fact that they do not use social media.

When comparing the Users group and the Both group, the participants from the Both group were more likely to state that their profiles are closer to exact replicas of their offline selves. They were also more likely to hint at the fact that creating a profile in any other way would be inauthentic. In line with these responses, the Both group was less likely to include that they portrayed idealized selves through their social media profiles.

However, the participants from the Both group explained that their video game avatars represented aspects of their idealized selves. The idealized attributes are performed not only though physical characteristics, but also personality traits and skills. Similarly, the Both group cared less about performing identity through social media pictures than the Users group. The participants in the Both group seemed to be concerned with capturing their offline identities

through pictures while the Users group was concerned with promoting an idealized and edited self through pictures.

On-Screen Acting

Gamers. A 19-year-old male in the Gamers group explained that there is a certain way of acting while playing games that differs from how he acts with his non-gamer friends. He also added that there is specific language used while playing that would not be relevant in other situations:

> Any game will have words that you would not use in everyday life, such as mana, cleave, etc. However, people often will create their own names for things within the game. In League of Legends there is a playable character called Aniva whos [sic] model is an ancient icy bird. Instead of calling her by her name, many players just call her "bird."

This respondent clearly outlines the two levels of language for in-game play. One is the verbiage that the creators have invented for the game; the other is language created by the gamers themselves.

Users. Some of the respondents explained that the one normative way of acting on social media is to keep profiles up to date. As a 19-year-old female put it, "I try to keep my profile updated with pictures and status's [sic] to maintain my social media identity and keep it up to date." Also, they highlighted similar themes to those of the Best Self Scenario theme by reporting that some normative ways of acting on social media are keeping out personal information.

A 19-year-old female respondent noted that increased online media usage has affected offline norms:

> I would say that the normative way of dressing has changed alot [sic], due to the random instances where someone decides to take a picture sometimes unknowingly and place it on a social site. This has changed the [way] I perceive my surroundings because you never know who is going to take a picture or video of your activity without you knowing.

This participant is worried about her identity maintenance on social media and therefore acts differently offline by thinking more about how she looks and where she is. This response illustrates the power of social media norms to transcend their original platforms and seep into offline expectations.

The majority of the students from the Users group reported using specific language while logged in. Most of them included that abbreviations are used. These abbreviations are adopted from older chat rooms and text messaging shortcuts. Some examples are as follows: LOL (laugh out loud), BTW (by the way), YOLO (you only live once), IDK (I don't know), and BRB (be right back).

Participants in the Users group also noted that there is certain terminology that the creators of social media have invented to make their sites stand out. For example, a few respondents noted that they use hashtags (#) to denote a special topic. The participants also reported that they use verbs that are created by the sites' creators that have become common-speak in the social media world. Some example verbs are: *tag* (to name someone in a photo or post), *friend* (to add someone to one's online network), *follow* (to subscribe to someone's updates), and *creep* (to lurk through profiles without the owners' knowledge).

Once again, these two types of language used are important in understanding identity performance on social media. Users not only utilize the lingo that the sites have created, they also craft their own language. The language choices are beneficial to Users because they help to

save time and to use the sites more efficiently, as with the Gamers' afforded and created terms. And, as with the Gamers, in-site jargon is important because users can more seamlessly perform identity—using the abbreviated language shows others that they are not novices.

Both. Gamers in the Both group commented on normative ways of acting in-game. One respondent, a 22-year-old male explained that he is careful to learn how to act while playing:

> I try to pick up on certain rules that aren't written into the game, but most gamers abide by. In most games the strategy of "camping" is looked down upon, so I don't do that. Picking a "cheap" class or weapon will also get a collective groan from the other players. Cheating or glitching is incredibly annoying and hated.

Some gamers noted that there is specific language such as *noob* (a new player) and *camping* (when a player remains in one spot in the game to get maximum points or kills). These language choices are important when performing identity in-game because they make gameplay easier and they allow players to portray their identities in desired ways.

As for social media, some of the participants noted that there is a certain way of acting that is acceptable. One respondent, a 22-year-old male, summed up the responses:

> Absolutely, there is certainly a code of conduct that most people feel obligated to follow (including myself). If someone posts something on your wall, you would do best to at least "like" it, even if you hate it. Also, tagging friends in whatever you do is now the norm, even if it is annoying and time consuming. People really get offended if you dont [sic] do certain actions on Facebook. Even if you haven't visited the website in a week, feelings will still be hurt because everyone can see everything all of the time.

In general, respondents noted that there are not necessarily discernible norms because they are merely acting online how they would offline. The previous quote touches on this point—just as in offline affairs, the respondent does not want to offend friends by ignoring them.

A few of the participants in this group stated that they used common abbreviations while on social media such as LOL or BTW. However, most of the respondents explained that they do not use a lot of different language online—they were quick to note that they write how they speak offline.

Comparison. Participants from the Gamers group and the Both group included that there are normative ways of acting that are "unwritten laws." These ways of performing work to both make gameplay more enjoyable for all involved and to establish that gamers are not *noobs*, or new players. Similarly, participants from the Users group and the Both group reported that there is a "code of conduct" for using social media. However, respondents in the Users group noted that a code of conduct is to keep profiles updated while respondents in the Both group reported a code of conduct as staying true to their offline self.

As in the Best Self Scenario theme, the Users who are also Gamers were more likely to report on language use in a way that implied that they found acting in any way different from their offline selves online incomprehensible. Many of the participants from the Both group reported not having different normative ways of acting online, while they did have normative ways of acting inside video games.

Respondents from all groups included that they used two kinds of digital language – programmer-created and user-created. However, the respondents in the Both group were less likely than those respondents in the Users group to report using a lot of lingo. This, again, can be

attributed to the fact that members in the Both group are more focused on defining their social media selves as similar to their offline selves.

Who's In, Who's Out?

Gamers. Only one of the two participants from the Gamers group reported having friends in-game. He noted that his friends are mostly friends from high school. He had also made a few friends through the game that are not his friends offline. When asked about potentially becoming embarrassed he replied:

> Definitely. Gaming is a big part of my life, however it can be seen as "nerdy" in the "party" culture of college. I spend many hours a day gaming and this can often be seen as a waste of time by non-gamers.

Clearly, this respondent sees his in-game life as separate from his offline life. Because of the stigma attached to gaming, he knows that there are certain ways of acting that are acceptable in-game while they often prove to be embarrassing and unaccepted offline.

Users. Most of the social media users described their online networks as consisting of mostly people they know offline. Just as they described their online identities as being close to their offline identities, many of the participants described their social media friends as relatively the same people that they are friends with offline. The respondents explained that most of the people they are friends with are at least acquaintances.

In line with Donath and boyd's (2004) explanation of the public display of networks, a few of the Users noted that they use current friends to research new friends. As a 23-year-old male explained, ". . .social media also allows [sic] for quicker dynamics through friending people online after only knowing of them shortly beforehand. Through peering through potential friends' profiles, it allows for faster and more efficient (at least starting out) relationships."

Many of the Users noted that they would not be embarrassed if someone from outside of their social media networks viewed their profiles. They attributed this to the fact that they had already worked hard on managing their identities on the social media stages, and as a result there would be nothing to be embarrassed about. Because of their careful editing and calculated spontaneity, most of the participants do not fear embarrassment.

This lack of potential embarrassment can perhaps be understood through the notion of context collapse (boyd, 2006). Because online social networks are often comprised of many, different offline networks, social media users are compelled to perform a self that is not only very calculated but also very superficial. That is, users must present themselves without much depth; only skimming the surface of their dynamic corporeal selves means not offending or ostracizing any one social group.

Both. Regarding gaming, the members of the Both group did not have much to report regarding in-game friends. Some of the respondents who reported on their in-game friends noted that they do not have friends in-game. Others included that sometimes they like to play with people that they know so that they can ascribe an avatar to a real person. In general, in-game friends did not seem important to the Both group.

Most of the gamers who answered the question regarding embarrassment commented that they would not be embarrassed if an outsider witnessed their in-game identities. They mostly attributed this fact to the notion that they are comfortable with their "nerdy" selves.

As in the Users group, many of the social media users in the Both group reported that they are friends with most of the people offline that they are friends with online. All of the respondents in the Both group stated that they would *not* be embarrassed if someone from outside of their social media network witnessed that identity. The participants attributed this

answer to the fact that, once again, they felt their social media profiles are almost exact replicas of their offline selves. They were adamant in stating that they would have no reason to be embarrassed because they are no different online than offline.

Comparison. Although the Gamers did not put that much emphasis on in-game friends, the Users went into deep discussions about who their online friends are compared to who their offline friends are. Respondents from the Users group and from the Both group explained that most of their friends are those people that they had at least met once offline. Some of them commented that they had gained friends online by using the mutual friend finder.

One of the two participants from the Gamers group included that he would feel embarrassed if people from outside his video game network saw how he performed his identity while playing. All of the participants who used social media, from the Users group and the Both group, generally agreed that they would not be embarrassed if an outsider gained an insider's view. However, they reported this answer for different reasons. Participants from the Users group noted that they would not feel embarrassed because they manage impressions online that are already filtered and idealized versions of themselves. On the other hand, members of the Both noted that they would not feel embarrassed because their social media identities are almost exact replicas of their offline identities.

Although I did not follow up with my informants in this particular study, it would be important to learn if social media users in the Both group employ social media in a complex manner, keeping their many offline audiences segregated. This is important because, as I have mentioned, the context collapse that occurs in most social media make it difficult for users to actually perform an online self that is exactly like the offline self. With that said, social media users do have options such as crafting personalized friend lists, using different social media

platforms for different contexts, and creating more than one profile within the same social media platform to represent different social selves. However, these tools are not often instigated because they are hard to find and time-consuming to implement.

Conclusions

Previous research has found that gamers and social media users both create idealized selves on-screen, are affected by others' while crafting and maintaining their identities, and reflect aspects of themselves through their on-screen personae. However, studies have not adequately explored what we can learn through comparing video gamers to social media users. Through an open-ended, online survey, I explored the similarities of video gamers and social media users employing Goffman's dramaturgical approach as a methodological tool.

This study has proven beneficial for two reasons. First, Goffman's dramaturgical approach has been further validated for exploring new media such as video games and social media, while also highlighting some contemporary caveats. Using his dramaturgical approach, this study uncovered themes that may aid in a more thorough understanding of performing identity in video games, performing identity in social media, and the similarities of the two. Second, this study found that comparing the digital identity performances of video gamers, social media users, and those who use both media allows for a fresh perception of identity performance and the implications of different platforms and media in the process.

In general, video gamers who focus on fulfilling idealized selves or on playing with identity in-game are less likely than social media users to describe themselves as creating idealized selves on social media. In fact, these participants almost all noted that lying or being fake on social media was inauthentic, and some expressed disbelief in users who feel the need to perform in this manner. Furthermore, video gamers who are less socially active in-game (do not

use specific in-game language, do not have friends in-game, and do not worry about creating personalized avatars) are more active on social media than the gamers that are socially active while playing.

Although similar themes regarding identity work emerged, general conclusions suggest that social media users who do not play video games use social media more like video games than active gamers. If gamers can form idealized selves within game worlds, they arguably have no need to maintain aspirational selves on social media. Thus, they were more likely to report performing their offline selves online.

One possible reason for this deviation is that role-playing has become more acceptable in-game than it is on social media. Current social media trends push for users to publish full biographies and pictures on social networking sites. Additionally, although gamers can play different games or create multiple avatars to play out different selves, current social media trends are also pushing toward monolithic online identities. Sites like Facebook track general internet usage and want users to login through other sites before participating in those sites.

The current confusion the exists for emerging adults using social media may be due to the fact that users are trying to employ social media as a place to play with identity, but they often fail because social media spaces are not as open as video game spaces. However, if social media are understood as providing video-game-like experiences, future research may begin to uncover the reasons for tension in the social media and identity field. As Gee (2008) discusses, it is important to apply aspects of gaming to all aspects of life. Gaming is similar to how humans prepare impressions in their minds for all situations, whether they are for offline performances or social media performances.

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Appendix

Sample Open-ended Survey

Section 1. Video Games

1. Do you play any video games? (if no, please move to Section 2.)
2. What video games do you play?
3. What are your primary reasons for playing these games?
4. Do you play games that require you to create a personalized avatar? (if no, please move to Section 2.)
5. What are the similarities and differences when comparing your avatar(s) to your offline identity
6. How closely do(es) your avatar(s) physically resemble you?
7. Do you play games that allow you to connect with other gamers? (if no, please move to Section 2.)
8. Are you a part of groups in the games?
9. Are these the same groups that you are a part of in other contexts? Why or why not?
10. Are your friends in the games the same as those in other contexts? Why or why not?
11. Is there a particular lingo you use in games that you would not use in other situations? Why?
12. Are there certain normative ways of acting to maintain your video game identity? Please explain some examples.
13. Are there certain facts that you emphasize or leave out in video games to maintain your identity? Please explain some examples.
14. Would you be embarrassed if someone who is not a part of your video game network experienced that side of you? Why?

Section 2. Social Media

1. Do you use any social media? (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, MySpace) (if no please move to Section 3.)
2. Which social media sites do you use?
3. What are your primary reasons for using these sites?
4. What information have you chosen to leave out of your profile(s)?
5. What are the similarities and differences when comparing your social media profile(s) to your offline identity?
6. Do you use a picture as part of your social media identity?
7. If you have chosen to use a picture, have you chosen a picture that displays you in a certain way? How? Why?
8. Are you a part of groups on social media?
9. Are these the same groups you are a part of in other contexts? Why or why not?
10. Are your friends on social media the same as those in other contexts? Why or why not?
11. Is there a particular “lingo” you use on social media that you would not use in other situations? Why?
12. Are there certain normative ways of acting to maintain your social media identity? Please explain some examples.
13. Are there certain facts that you emphasize or leave out on social media to maintain your identity? Please explain some examples.

14. Would you be embarrassed if someone who is not a part of your social media network experienced that side of you? Why?

Section 3. Demographics

1. What is your gender?
2. How old are you?
3. With what ethnic background do you most identify? (examples: Caucasian, African American, Native American)